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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the nature and function of interlanguage in second language acquisition draws on research on interlanguage and experiences in teaching German to Finnish secondary students. The theories giving rise to the concept of interlanguage are outlined and compared, and the characteristics of interlanguage are discussed. Special attention is given to the roles of grammar, interpretation, interlanguage as dialect, linguistic patterns of the language learner, psycholinguistic processes in language learning, and fossilization. Grammatical and other language patterns reflecting the development of interlanguage found in 432 German essays written by 38 Finnish students are briefly described, and questions to be addressed in future research about interlanguage are presented. A 31-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Topic: The Development of Interlanguage

Abstract

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Topic: Zur Entwicklung der Interlanguage

When a learner is in the process of acquiring a second language he constructs a specific language system for himself. Selinker has given this the name, interlanguage. Other researchers in the field use other terms such as 'transitional competence' or 'idiosyncratic dialect' (Corder), 'approximative system' (Nemser), and 'interim language' (Raabe, Bausch).

This interlanguage has many features in common with the target language and contains elements of the language from which the learner starts out and of other languages which he already knows. Most scholars are also of the opinion that it has elements which cannot be explained. This is proof of the fact that the interlanguage is structurally autonomous. Further, it is not constant but changes all the time on the foundation of the learner's previous linguistic and communicational experience. It gradually approaches the target language and is consequently goal-directed. The formation of stable intersystems or subsystems is prevented by effective teaching. The interlanguage can be characterised as at once variable and systematic. The early stages of an interlanguage are characterised by a weakness in the ability to differentiate in the phonological, grammatical, and lexical categories; the Inter stages, on the other hand, by hypercorrectness and analogy.

In conclusion I should like to offer some examples from my own research. My material consists of 432 German essays written by 38 Finnish Senior School pupils over a space of three years.

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The fact that I had essays from a period of three years written by the same students enabled me to follow the development of their interlanguage.

Although I have in the first place conducted an analysis of errors I should like to make specially clear that the material for the comparison between target and interlanguage does not merely consist of mistakes; the interlanguage has to be considered as a whole. For this reason I have made the errors of the relative to his successes and also taken into consideration the style (e.g. diction) of the learner.

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Zur Entwicklung der Interlanguage

The Development of Interlanguage

It is characteristic of research published in the field of the development of interlanguage that in it a multitude of hypotheses is set against a small number of empirical analyses. It is important to counteract the tendency to an autonomous construction of theories and to ensure that the attention is not too much occupied with theoretic problems but rather devotes itself intensively to the concrete problems of real learners. At the same time it seems necessary to me to set forth, in the first part of my paper largely well-known theories of interlanguage so that I may critically discuss them afterwards. In the course of this critical discussion I shall allude briefly to the results of my own research. And finally I should like to present a range of open questions whose solution should be looked for not within the framework of new theories but in the analysis of concrete learners' problems and of the phenomena of language learning.

Insights into the language of the foreign language learner have been gained through the study, among other things, of learners' mistakes. The mistakes are a natural part of the learning process and also the sign of a definite learning strategy (Corder 1967, 163). Learning strategies are a constituent element of the second language or interlanguage rule-forming process, which the learner systematically employs for the purpose of constructing, checking, and revising hypotheses concerning the second language (Tarone/Frauenfelder/Selinker 1976, 99f.). The mistakes of a foreign language learner have a certain degree of regularity about them and this regularity suggests that he is following definite rules. These are not the rules of the language he has to learn; they are the rules of the transitional language. It must be particularly emphasised that the characteri-

sation of the transitional language does not merely consist of the defective formulations of the learner; his language needs to be considered as a whole.

What we call a transitional language is variously designated by different scholars, e.g. Selinker's 'interlanguage' (1969, 1972), 'transitional competence' (Corder 1967), 'idiosyncratic dialect' (Corder 1971), 'approximative system' (Nemser 1971), 'compromise system' (Filipović 1972), 'learner language' in the case of Richards/Sampson (1974), 'Interimsprache' or 'interim language' (Raabe 1974, 1976; Bausch/Raabe 1978), 'Lernersprache' or 'learner language' (Lauerbach 1977; Kielhöfer/Börner 1979).

It is not only in their designations of interlanguage that the scholars differ but also in their conceptions of it. One thing, however, they all have in common the idea that this language in many ways reflects the target language and contains in itself elements of the language the learner starts out from or of other languages he is already acquainted with. Most scholars are also of the opinion that this language contains elements which resist interpretation. This is evidence of the fact that it is structurally autonomous. Further, it is not constant but changes all the time on the basis of the sum total of the previous linguistic and communicational experience of the learner. It draws gradually closer to the target language and may be said, consequently, to be directed to a goal. Effective teaching prevents the formation of stable intersystems or subsystems. The interlanguage can be characterised as being at once systematic, variable, and dynamic.

The earlier stages of interlanguage are characterised by a weakness in the ability to differentiate in the phonological, grammatical, and lexical categories; the later stages on the other hand, by analogy.

In the following pages I shall mention a few opinions which I personally consider important in the description of interlanguage.

According to Corder the language of a foreign language learner has its own grammar. It is a language of itself, a unique idiolect, which indubitably shares many features with the target language. The learner is the sole speaker of his dialect. He tries to communicate effectively through it. Consequently his language may be described with the help of the rules.

Many sentences in the target language and the starting out language have the same interpretation. Many rules which are necessary for understanding the language of the learner are identical with those required to understand the sentences in the target language. The language of the learner is consequently a dialect in the linguistic sense because languages which share some rules of grammar are dialects.

Corder speaks of many different dialects. He distinguishes between those which form the language of a social group, and those which do not form the language of a social group, that is to say, those which are specific to an individual what are called idiosyncratic dialects. A language different from the idiosyncratic dialects is the idiolect which is a personal dialect. One may call it a mixture of dialects.

All idiosyncratic dialects have a characteristic in common, namely, that some of the rules necessary for understanding them are peculiar to an individual. Thus, these rules are not the conventions of a social group. This means that these sentences are incapable of being interpreted because interpretation is partly dependent on the fact of an awareness of the conventions relating to a sentence. Among the idiosyncratic dialects may be counted, in addition to the language of a foreign language learner, the language of a poem, the language of a man suffering from aphasia, and the language of a child (Corder 1971, 147 ff.).

According to Selinker interlanguage is a dialect whose rules inhere in the characteristics of two social dialects or languages whether or no the languages share these rules. Here we have to do with language universals.

If we should wish to predict behaviour in the theory of foreign language learning we would, according to Selinker, have to take into consideration first and foremost the linguistic patterns of the statements to be produced in the interlanguage. On this basis (1) the statements in the native tongue of the learner produced by the learner, (2) the statements in the interlanguage produced by the learner, and (3) the statements in the target language produced by the native speaker are psychologically of great significance in the learning of a foreign language.

According to Selinker there are five principal psycho-linguistic processes in the latent psychological structure which are activated when one tries to learn a foreign language. The processes in question are as follows: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralisation of target language material.

While Selinker limits 'language transfer' to transfers from the base language other writers print to additional second languages as transfer sources which the learner draws upon when, for example, he is more strongly impressed with the similarity between a first second language and a second second language than with that between the base language and a second second language (Kellerman 1977; Ringbom/Palmberg 1976).

Selinker also assumes that while the system already formulated in the brain is different in the case of different people, the readiness to learn a symbolic language and the capacity to construct a grammar capable of describing linguistic data audibly are, on the other hand, universal, common to all men. What language the child then learns depends on the language

spoken around it.

According to Selinker there is no genetic 'time table' in the latent structure. It is not certain whether the latent structure can be activated at all or realised as a kind of natural language. There is also the possibility that the latent learning structure partly overlaps with other intellectual structures.

Selinker assumes that fossilisation too is to be found in the latent structure. The linguistic phenomena which become fossilised are linguistic rules, units, and subsystems. The speakers of the base language tend to preserve it in their interlanguage when they try to use the target language. Such fossilised structures have a tendency to persist as potential and to manifest themselves again and again in the interlanguage although they may appear to have vanished. In their periodic appearence extra-linguistic and psychological factors play a great role. Selinker is of the opinion that the theory of foreign language learning should exert itself to explain the reappearance of these linguistic structures in the performance of the interlanguage. Each of the aforementioned processes (language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language communication, overgeneralisation of target language material) elicits, according to Selinker, fossilised material in the expressional manifestations of the surface structures of the interlanguage (Selinker 1972).

Selinker poses the question why some forms become fossilised while others do not (Selinker 1969, 68). Selinker's static conception of fossilisation has been criticised and demands made that it be given a more dynamic quality (Bausch 1977).

For my research I have had as material 432 German language essays written by 38 Finnish Senior Secondary School pupils over a period of three years. Because I had the essays of the essays of the same students over this period of time I was able to follow the development of their interlanguage. Mistakes

which may be attributed to a transfer from the native tongue have a particular tendency to repeat themselves. This does not necessarily mean a fossilisation; it can involve each time a new creativity.

Most mistakes are made in the area of nouns and verbs. In the early stages mistakes involving the article, particularly the omission of the article, are very frequent. The mistake omitting the article is slowly got over but Finns always have difficulty in discriminating between the definite and indefinite articles. English and Swedish, it must be added, afford help in the use of the article. In the formation of the plural the tendency to error is spread evenly over every stage of learning. Errors of case constitute a large proportion initially but become gradually less. It is difficult to make out whether these mistakes derive from ignorance of the article or incorrect formation of the case let alone the use of case. The use of the correct case form together with prepositions and agreement of the verb must also be counted among the greater difficulties. These mistakes occur at all stages of the learning process. They can be overcome only through long practice. The pupils have first of all to cram or get by heart the rections.

Mistakes in conjugating the verb disappear at the latest in the second year. On the other hand mistakes in the use of the auxiliary verb start to occur, particular in the case of the auxiliary verb sein. There are also mistakes in the formation of the imperfect tense, the perfect participle, and the subjunctive. The use of the particle zu poses no problems for Finns because they have already learned English. The passive tends to be blithely avoided in the essays.

The inflexion of the adjective as attribute remains a great problem at all stages. Other languages offer no help to the Finns here. The adjective as predicative tends to be inflected on the Swedish model.

The position of the auxiliary verb in the subsidiary clause

is often forgotten even by advanced students. They also at all stages forget, in the course of free composition, the position of the infinitive and the prefix in the case of separable verbs.

The question arises, under what conditions does fossilisation occur? It is closely bound up with the assumption of a critical period, as it is called, in the acquisition of a second language. In his first formulation of the interlanguage hypothesis Selinker assumed a latent psycho-structure which, during the acquisition of a second language is activated as an analogous construct to the pre-pubescent 'language acquisition device' (Lenneberg 1972), is similarly genetically conditioned and accounts for the second language acquisition of post-pubescent learners (Bausch 1977).

According to the hypothesis postulated in development psychology, fossilisation makes its appearance with the beginning of formal cognitive operations and proceeds to complicate the unobstructed effectiveness of the mental mechanisms which determine the acquisition of the base language. The age of the learner is a decisive variable in the second language acquisition process, particularly when it comes to fossil formations (cf. Schumann 1975).

The desire of the learner to communicate and the degree of his identification with or acculturation in the second language speech community have been identified as decisive psychologic variables on which fossilisation depends (Fillmore 1976; Schumann 1976). Essential for the onset of fossilisation according to Vigil/Oller (1976) is the role played by the feedback which the learner receives from native speakers about his language habits.
For example Brown (1979) believes that a critical period of second language acquisition is determined primarily by sociocultural factors independent of the age and physiology Selinker and Lamendella (1978) in the most finely discriminating account of fossilisation yet present the opinion that only the joint effect of neuro-psychological and socio-psychological factors

could adequately explain the fact of fossilisation.

Nemser calls the language system that the student of a foreign language derives from the target language an approximative system. Because it takes on a different appearance in different phases of the learning process and consequently has a provisional character, it is of decisive significance in every concrete teaching and learning situation. Nemser characterises interlanguage, for instance, as follows: 1. The language of the learner at a definite print of time, an approximative system which is differently structured from the language he starts out from and the language he moves towards. 2. Interlanguage is learned step by step as intermediate stages. Thus there comes about a chain of development (Nemser 1971, 115 ff.).

Once the interlanguage of the foreign language learner has been described, the description may be compared against that of the target language. The differences that become apparent constitute the task the learner has before him.

Once such interim systems are stabilised they can turn into languages in their own right as, for example, creole or pidgin English which serve a communicative function. Foreign or guest workers without systematic language learning tend to form similar firm interim systems, too.

Finally, some questions arise which, on the basis of this paper, remain at least partly unanswered:

1. How can the problem of the variability of interlanguage, obviously a sequence of different phases of learning, be solved?

2. How many such linguistically apprehensible learning stages - in other words, how many interlanguages - are there?

3. How far may we make use of the quantitative data of error analysis in the description of interlanguage?

4. On the basis of what criteria can one derive from the performance data at hand conclusions as to a basic competence?

5. Is it theoretically possible beside L_1 and L_2 competence to speak of a third component = Interlanguage?

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